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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a synopsis of the findings of a full-length ethnographic study which dealt with the phenomenon of the strong, veteran teacher who has succeeded in remaining enthusiastic over the course of a 30-year career. Subjects were five secondary school teachers of varied ethnic backgrounds representing a range of disciplines and teaching in widely divergent settings. Through open-ended interviews and participant observations, the study explored those factors in the home lives, career histories, and personalities of these teachers that have contributed to their resiliency and success over time. The study also explored the extent to which the beliefs and attitudes of these five subjects corresponded to the ones attributed to veteran experts in other literature in the area. Although the teachers varied widely in their teaching styles and personalities, key similarities were found among them. These included: retention of the novice perspective on teaching and an urgency and vitality in their approach to teaching; their emphasis on teacher control and consistent pursuit of self-actualization, with much less emphasis on student enablement; and low esteem for their own teacher preparation. These five teachers applauded recent attempts to reduce required classroom hours in education and refocus attention on academic coursework. What they described as lacking in their own education comes close to what has been called pedagogical content knowledge, i.e., subject knowledge presented ass it might be taught, with sensitivity to the structure of specific disciplines and the way learners assimilate those structures. (JD)

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Ethnographic Portraits of Veteran Teachers:

Portraits of Survival and Commitment

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This paper offers a brief synopsis of the findings of a full-length ethnographic study which dealt with the phenomenon of the strong, veteran teacher--the teacher who has succeeded in remaining invested and enthusiastic over the course of a thirty year career. The study explored, through intensive, open-ended interviews and participant observations, those factors in the home lives, career histories, and personalities of these individuals which have contributed to their resiliency and their success over time. The objective of this study was to understand the nature of a long and successful career in the field by listening to the voices of teachers who had experienced such careers, and to reveal the various faces of excellence as they were made manifest through the intimate lens of ethnography. The study also explored the extent to which the beliefs and attitudes of these five subjects corresponded to the ones attributed to veteran experts in other quantitative and qualitative literature in the area. The findings reported in this paper will focus on

three of the key points which emerged in the course of data analysis.

Significance of the Study

At a time when the attrition rate among highly qualified teachers has escalated to more than 50% within the first five years of employment, it is clear that there is much to learn about the nature of survival in the classroom. While voluminous literature currently exists on the subject of burnout, far less has been written on the teacher who survives the system with morale and enthusiasm intact. No study to date has taken an ethnographic approach on the subject. By seeing the profession through the lens of a successful survivor, one gains a unique perspective on many of the problems which drive so many of the best recruits so quickly out of the field; and also on those particular character traits which guard against defeat--information that is invaluable in any attempt to better teaching conditions and schools. What is more, knowledge about how veteran teachers think can inform predictors about how those teachers are likely to respond to future policy initiatives, and guide efforts to shape those responses. Public policy needs to build on what teachers already know. What better way to tap into that knowledge than through the practical wisdom of competent, veteran teachers?

Methodolody

As ethnography, the goal of this research was to generate what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls "thick description" of its subjects. The emphasis was on the subject's own voice, and interviews were open-ended, following a loose chronology of the

subject's life. Interviews (with subjects, their colleagues, their families, and students), classroom observations, and personal documents represented the three primary data sources. Following the format for grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) analysis and data collection occured in a pulsating fashion: Preliminary data collection was followed by analysis and theory development, which in turn was followed by further interviews, revision of theory, and so on, with emerging themes in the course of the interviews guiding subsequent data collection.

Subjects and setting

The five subjects in this study hold in common the fact that they are all secondary public school teachers, all veterans of thirty years or more, and all individuals who have developed powerful reputations in their communities and states. The subjects presently teach in very different settings, ranging from an affluent New York City prep school, to a sprawling inner city public school in south Texas. They represent, too, a range of disciplines--math, foreign language, English, and science; and are themselves ethnically diverse: Four are the children of Jewish, Chinese, or Italian immigrant parents. The last is a sixth generation American, of English descent.

The subjects for this study were initially located through word-of-mouth. The concern of the study was not with investigating the attitudes and behaviors of the "greatest teachers in America;" but rather with those of strong teachers who had left powerful impacts on their students. My concern, in short, was

with the more mundane hero, who had quietly persisted over many years in quietly changing lives.

Having identified five geographically and economically diverse communities, an initial survey was undertaken of parents involved in school politics, local schools of education, principals and students. This survey yielded a list of possible subjects. Based on these recommendations, exploratory interviews were conducted with a dozen individuals. Those that were ultimately chosen were done so for the clarity with which they could articulate their experiences, their willingness to reveal themselves candidly, and the rapport that seemed to exist between the researcher and the subject--an essential component for on-going, open-ended interviews. They were also individuals whose success had more than a subjective component to it: individuals who had won awards for their teaching, had taken on visible leadership positions among their faculty, had written textbooks or speerheaded new programs in their schools. Perhaps most importantly, they were individuals who seemed to demonstrate a continued passion for their work, and who were clearly, after thirty years--still introspective about what they were doing.

The following are brief summaries of the individuals profiled in the study:

Bill: Bill Salerno has been teaching secondary English for over 35 years. The son of Italian immigrant parents who spoke no English at home, Bill developed early-on a tremendous passion for reading. He attended one of the special academic high schools in New York City, attended New York University, and then entered the

army where had had his first experience as a teacher--leading classes in grave registration and rodent extermination. Bill received his masters from Teachers College, Columbia University and then began teaching in a succession of inner city New York public schools--schools deemed so difficult to work in that teachers received double-year credit for each year of employment there. Bill eventually made his way to New York City's Bronx High School of Science, a school for gifted students, where he eventually chaired the English Department. Over the course of his teaching career, Bill has received an honorary doctorate from Georgetown University, and been runner-up for the national teacher of the year.

Ruth: Ruth is the daughter of Jewish immigrants who "fell in love with the word French" the first time she heard it. From high school on, Ruth claims to have been convinced that her destiny would involve the language and culture of France. In high school and college she won awards for her work in French, and began her teaching career on the college level, serving as an adjunct at the University of Missouri. When her doctoral studies were interrupted by the birth of her first child, Ruth settled into a career as a junior and then senior high school French teacher. She has been working at the same suburban New Jersey public school for over thirty years, where she began the school's Advanced Placement Literature, and Advanced Placement Language programs. She has been teaching these courses, and designing curriculum for a range of others for over twenty years, and has built an extraordinary reputation in her community as a teacher

and a scholar of French culture.

Andy: Andy Galligani grew up with the double handicaps of poverty and polio. Raised in the pine barrens of Southern New Jersey, Andy earned a full scholarship to college at Rutgers University, and then began teaching English in rural areas of the state. A gadfly from the start, Andy became a strong leader in the local teacher's union, heading the salary negociation committee for many years, and speerheading much of the reform that transformed the schools in his area. For the past fifteen years, Andy has had a particular interest in the mentoring of new teachers. As chair of his department, he has had a powerful impact on virtually every teacher working with him.

Paul: Paul Fraser, the son of upper middle class Texans, began his career in the navy, building nuclear submarines under Admiral Rickover. Like Ruth, he has spent his entire teaching career in one school--a small suburban high school in South Texas, the sole high school in an insulated, affluent community. Paul's reputation, however, has spread beyond the state: As the author of four nationally adopted math textbooks, and chair of numerous national math education organizations, he is in constant demand as as speaker. Despite his reknown, however, Paul has rarely missed a day of school or an Alamo Heights basketball game. His loyalties to institutions are fierce--his school, his church, his town.

Lily: Lily is the daughter of Chinese immigrants, who grew up within in the insulated Chinese community of San Antonio. She entered teaching by default, seeing it as the best available

option for a young woman of her time and ethnicity. For many years, Lily was virtually the only Chinese teacher in the entire city--the ninth largest in the United States; and her promotion to department chair fifteen years ago also represented a dramatic policy departure for the community. Lily has been the champion of the under-achiever for all the years she has been in the classroom. At Brackenridge High School,a large inner-city institution, she has brought dozens of curricular changes to her department, implementing a range of new experience-oriented science programs. The Engineering Club, which she founded almost a decade ago, attracts dozens of minority students each year. She has helped a great many of these students obtain science scholarships to the most competitive schools in the country.

The subjects cited here were interviewed and observed over a series of months in 1988 and 1989.

Findings

One of the first and most striking findings of the study was the difference in personal style apparent in each of these five subjects. Several were wildly theatrical--flamboyanat entertainers who kept their classes in thrall. Others were subdued, introspective--with voices one had to strain to hear. Some were extremely candid, others guarded. Some were political rabblerousers, others seemed profoundly resigned. No one teaching method prevailed, nor one policy regarding discipline or evaluation. On the surface, the diversity among these individuals was confounding.

But in the slow course of data analysis, it became clear that a number of key similarities did indeed exist among them. These included a tremendous passion for their subjects (in each case, "subject" seemed to be loved more than teaching was loved), supportive families, and an ideosyncratic nature that seemed to set them apart from the norm. There were shared strategies for dealing with bureaucratic intrusions, shared skepticism of innovation, and shared policies towards such controversial issues as bilingual education, school restructuring, and merit pay. (All five subjects were opposed to all three of these.)

Other similarities, the key findings of the study, are discussed below:

The Persistent Novice Perspective

Another dramatic commonalities observed among the five teachers in this study emerged in light of seminal research on career and adult development. This literature was necessarily consulted prior to beginning the intensive interviews which provided the substance for the case studies, and the frameworks suggested in this literature served to organize the coding categories during initial data collection.

The literature which seemed to have particular bearing on this study fell into three categories: research on adult development per se ; studies on career development; and studies dealing specifically with teacher development, including seminal research on moral and ego stages by Lawrence Kohlberg (1976) and J. Loevinger (1976), and those on teacher concerns by Francis Fuller (1975).

What became manifest early-on in the course of data collection, was the degree to which the subjects of this study failed to correspond in any marked way to the predictable stages laid out in the literature cited above. In the areas of teacher and career development, that discontinuity was particularly apparent. All of these teachers exhibited at least some traits, for example, most clearly associated with Loevinger's "immature" stage of ego development--a stage supposedly attained and surpassed in the very first years of teaching. Young teachers, writes Loevinger, tend to be impulsive and self-protective in the

classroom; their primary concern is the avoidance of personal pain and discomfort. Yet Ruth claims that the primary motivator for her is the avoidance of the discomfort of "boredom." "I teach so as not to bore myself--even if it means jumping on a chair or digressing from the topic for ten or fifteen minutes. I'm very impulsive and spontaneous in that way. I figure that whatever I'm feeling, the kids must be feeling--so I go with my own feelings." Paul explains the changes he makes in his teaching style during administrative observations in purely Loevinger level-one terms: "I do what I have to do to get a good evaluation. When the supervisor leaves, I do what I want to do."

All of the teachers in this study appear almost morbidly concerned with the opinions of others, especially the opinions their students--again, a trait most often associated with the uninitiated novice. One subject claims that she "cares very, very much about how the students respond to me. In fact, up until recently I was so tuned in, so sensitive, that my feelings were always getting hurt. I would be thinking all the time: 'So-and-so isn't interested in this,' or 'so-and-so is angry,' and I'd usually blame myself." The tale told by Bill's colleague about his condition during the first weeks of school is typical of these subjects: Greeting him with a pat on the back, she finds, "His shirt was soaked through as if he had jumped into a pool... Until he gets the kids to like him, until he wins them over," she says, " he's a nervous wreck." Carl

claims that one of the major set-backs of his life was the rejection of his textbook by colleagues in the school. "It was devastating to me that they didn't want to use my ideas. It was a personal rejection, deeply personal--because my ideas are who I am. And I care so much about [my colleagues'] opinions of me."

These low-level concerns, however, seem to cooexist in the subjects with innumerable traits more predictably associated with professionals of their age and experience. The effect in conversation of these multi-leveled concerns is one of continuous contradiction: A subject may in one breath voice a sense of anxiety over such low-level issues as discipline or classroom management; in another, he may speak philosophically about the meaning of education and the impact of his work on students over time. Naivite and wisdom, vulnerability and self-confidence seem to assert and reassert themselves continually.

Their capacity to retain the "novice perspective" also seems to have afforded them unusual empathy with young teachers entering the field. All five of the subjects in the study have been extremely active in championing the rights of new recruits--particularly concerning issues of pay and benefits. In each case, where such actions were pertinent, the subjects here claimed full willingness to make personal financial sacrifices as a way to boost compensation for young teachers. While their degree of militancy seems

influenced to some extent by regional differences (Northeastern subjects preached a more radical doctrine than their Southern colleagues), all five clearly feel an enormous obligation to help new teachers survive in the field; again and again, all five gratuitously voiced their sense of outrage at those injustices in the profession to which new teachers are most vulnerable--as if they were in intimate empathy with the plight of the new recruit.

What is perhaps most interesting and surprising about this "novice perspective" is the degree to which its persistence seems to play a role in terms of these individuals' longevity in the field: By retaining many of the traits of young and inexperienced teachers, they have succeeded in retaining an urgency and vitality that is an antidote to burnout. There is a powerfully youthful quality to these subjects--apparent in their outlook, their energy, their politics and insecurities. It is as if the young teacher were still operating in the worldly body--wide-eyed, easily disarmed, desperate to prove herself. The daily "stage fright" that all these subjects claim to experience upon entering each class, seems to act as a powerful motivator to engage in scrupulous advanced preparation, even after years of teaching the same subject. There is no resting on past laurels, no complacency, no jadedness. Everyday, it seems, these teachers feel they need to prove themselves again. "The great thing about teaching," Ruth says, "is how every day is brand new. Every class is like my

very first class. I start all over again. It's frightening and exhilerating every single day."

Self-Enablement vs. Student-Enablement

According to prevailing ideas on the subject, set forth by John Goodlad (1984), Ken Macrorie (1984) and others who have investigated the behaviors of expert teachers, such veterans are--first and foremost-- great enablers. They are individuals whose primary goal in the classroom is to empower their students. Macrorie writes that great teachers "set up dialogues between the experience and ideas of learners and the experience and ideas of authorities." They "eschew lectures." They don't give "conventional tests." Great teachers avoid "frightening learners out of their unconscious selves." Goodlad's expert teacher makes her classroom "a place where students participate in self-directed learning; [where there are] a variety of instructional activities and small group work." Great teachers, according to Goodlad, provide a student-centered classroom.

Early-on in the course of data collection, it became clear that all of my subjects failed to correspond in any marked way to these conventional notions about expert teaching. In the classrooms of these individuals, there was more than a little frontal lecture (and passionate justification for it); there were conventional tests. More often than not, these teachers did not avoid, but rather strove to frighten their students out of their unconscious selves: Paul's remarks on this subject seemed to be a coda for all five teachers: "Some people's mission in life is to

comfort the afflicted," he says. "My mission is to afflict the comfortable." "Teaching means the awakening of kids out of their somnolence," Lily says. "Even if it means roughing them up in the process."

Finally, the subjects in this study did not run "student-centered classrooms." Indeed, though it was not always apparent on the surface, every one of their classrooms were the very opposite of student-centered: They were teacher-centered. In every case, beneath a veneer of freedom or even laxity, the teacher's singular and central force made itself manifest. In every case, he or she held an invisible rein on what transpired in the course of any class--tightening and loosening that rein with great self-consciousness. Even when students freely interacted with each other, when they challenged teacher's comments, or engaged in guided inquiry, each of these teachers remained the pivotal figure in the activity. When there was laughter, it was teacher-initiated. When there was debate, all eyes rested on the teacher to deliver the final, unchallenged verdict. "Teacher" emerged not only as power-center, but as moral center as well: the quiet, unswerving fulcrum of authority and wisdom.

When questioned about this phenomenon, which I came to regard as a kind of "benign tyranny," the subjects in this study revealed another commonality: Their responses suggested that the overriding goal of their teaching had little to do with student-enablement. They were concerned,

rather, with "self-enablement"--with the getting and holding of power: "When I'm in the classroom," Ruth says, "I'm thinking about myself, and the effect I'm trying to elicit in the audience, the role I'm trying to play. If I'm successful, I can feel the audience approval--and that's what its all about." Or Bill: "I teach because it gives me enormous pleasure to teach, pure and simple. I can make every class whatever I want it to be. The classroom is mine." Indeed, in every case, the subject's classroom came to appear as a kind of theatrical stage where a variety of teacher-needs could be asserted and worked through-- the need for applause, the need for control, the need for playing out personal talents or interests. Lily can turn her classroom into a private laboratory--a fantasy space filled with her own collection of "toys." Paul can find there an unjudging audience for his humor and boyish antics. Bill can find unlimited affection.

What Macrorie refers to as "student enablement" emerged, then, as merely a secondary biproduct of these teachers' consistent pursuit of self-actualization. Consciously or unconsciously, each of them seemed to believe the same thing: If teacher needs are satisfied, students will ultimately benefit.

This is obviously an unorthodox and unsettling proposition for those of us outside the secondary classroom who have assumed good teachers must be first and foremost devoted to student learning. The narcissism that seems to be

at the root of these teachers' perspective goes against the grain of what we imagine teachers to be: unselfish civil servants laboring for the public good. This image of the selfless teacher has its roots, no doubt, in the very earliest organized examples of our profession--in Sunday schools and church-run charity schools. It has been reinforced by the gender-structure of schooling into the mid- to late-twentieth century: Teaching, we know, has always been the domain of women largely because it was considered to be an occupational extension of mothering, the consummately selfless activity.

Yet researchers on burnout (Dedrick, 1982; Cruikshank, 1980; et al) have long contended that one of the major causes of that phenomenon in teachers is their tendency towards self-abnegation in the classroom. The teacher is taught that the student comes first. He is taught this not only through the intuited messages of the culture, but also in his own teacher education, and in his observed experience with administrators in public and private schools. Research shows that years of this kind of psychic self-sacrifice take an enormous toll on the teacher--a toll which leads to incompetence, depression, and attrition (Dedrick, 1982).

It is not hard to see then that some degree of self-involvement is vital to some teacher's long-term survival in the field. Undeniably, the subjects in this study have remained invested--at least to some extent--because they have remained self-contained. To condemn that self-

involvement, to legislate against it through public policy, or to ignore the positive ramifications of it when readying new teachers for the field, is to undermine a seemingly necessary toughness upon which vital longevity may be predicated.

The Case Against Teacher Education

One of the more distressing commonalities to emerge from the five case studies concerns the subjects' shared response to their own teacher preparation. It is a subject that was raised gratuitously in the course of interviews by every one of the profiled teachers, and--in each case--spoken about with an alarming passion, given the number of years that have passed since these individuals received their "training."

In every case, teacher education courses were characterized as "boring," "useless," "intellectually demeaning." One of the basic problems, Bill claims, is "overkill." "There are some things worth reading--things that can help a young person getting ready for the classroom. But mixed in with the valuable stuff is so much bull, so much filler--things that are absolutely self-evident. The whole semester's program at Teachers College could have been condensed to a couple of courses." Bill is typical of the others when he speaks about the radical discrepancy in rigor and content-base between the courses he took in the School of Education and those in the English department of the school of arts and sciences, where "brilliant men challenged their students with challenging ideas." "In the education courses I made finger puppets and bulletin boards; in the English courses, I grappled with the significance of language and the structure of thought." Lily

remembers an educational psychology course, typical of all those she took, in which hundreds of dollars of books were required. "Nothing was assigned," she says. "If you memorized the subheadings in the chapters--'The Importance of Praise' or "Teens Need Space'--you could get an A on the exam. And new teachers coming into the field say exactly the same thing. I've seen the texts they use in their classes now. The covers have changed, but the substance--or lack of it--is the same."

The rhetoric of education, too, seems to have been uniformly off-putting to these subjects: "When I started to get the flavor of what it was like to be in these classes," says Andy, "somehow my English training made me look at that kind of language and that kind of superficial talk as disgusting. It would be like a person who's learned to appreciate Milton trying to get some degree of satisfaction out of reading Little Red Riding Hood." One subject remembers "the outpourings of words that pointed to nothing, or if they pointed to something, they pointed to things like 'if the climate is appropriate then education will proceed with effectiveness, producing a positive climate.' It goes around in circles, and I've never met a classroom teacher who didn't ridicule that kind of language, who didn't privately scorn it."

As a teacher educator, one's first impulse is to rationalize away the complaints lodged by these five veterans. In the first place, one thinks, all the subjects

in the study received their teacher training over twenty-five years ago. Certainly, at that time, pedagogical jargon was decidedly less self-reflective than it is today. What is more, the era in which these subjects' professional educations took place--the fifties and very early sixties--would seem to coincide with what was perhaps the most perscriptive and reactionary period in education since the turn of the century. Fueled by cold-war fears and the dire predictions of Arthur Bestor, teacher-proof curricula and standardized tests proliferated; and the teacher herself, perhaps more blatantly then than ever before or since, was perceived as less than central to the education process.

But despite the time lapse, the rise of critical thinking curricula, the adoption of more descriptive and even ecological forms of educational research, the movement for teacher empowerment, and the legitimacy of "action-research" (all policies seemingly designed to bring the teacher to center stage), to what extent can the same complaints still be justifiably leveled against teacher education programs today? Clearly, in recent years there have been signs throughout the profession that teacher education has come less far than it might. The new abundance of alternative certification programs in dozens of states, for example, seems testament not only to the shrinking applicant pool in the the profession, but to the deep suspicion on the part of state and local agencies as to the real efficacy of traditional teacher education programs. The

increasingly ill-prepared ranks of those who do pass through such programs has been documented in scores of studies. Indeed, the teacher education reform recommendations made in the last few years by the Holmes Group (1986) and the Carnegie Foundation (1986) seem to address precisely those issues about which these subjects complained most vehemently: the lack of intellectural rigor in professional coursework, the overemphasis on university classroom vs. field-based experiences, the tendency to substitute formula for deliberative problem-solving.

Schools and departments of education that have taken these criticisms to heart appear to be constructing teacher training programs which, for the first time, might actually meet the real needs of novice versions of the subjects in this study. First, they are programs which acknowledge in their form and content the idiosyncratic nature of good teaching, rethinking much of the real traditional prescription which has characterized teacher education. The subjects in this study applaud recent attempts on the part of certifying institutions to reduce required classroom hours in education, and refocus attention on academic coursework, arguing that methods courses too often neutralize personality and de-intellectualize academic content. What they describe as lacking in their own educations comes close to what Lee Schulman(1986) calls "pedagogical content knowledge," subject knowledge presented as it might be taught, with a sensitivity to the structure

of specific disciplines and the way learners assimilate those structures. Whereas traditional methods courses offered skill devoid of content, and traditional academic courses offered content devoid of skill, pedagogical content knowledge is the necessary bridge between the two. Even these most gifted teachers claim to have struggled in the beginning for lack of it.

These portraits also suggest the necessity for other changes in teacher preparation. Lortie (1986) concludes in his seminal study of teachers and teaching that "interpersonal capacities" are at the very core of effective outcomes; that style or personality, in short, is key to classroom success. If this is true--and it certainly seems true in the case of the subjects here--then pre-service teachers need more and extended opportunities to practice those interpersonal skills in real school settings. Practica and other school-site experiences become a critical testing-ground for aspiring teachers--risk-free stages on which novices can test their personalities on students, and begin to formulate a style with which they are comfortable.

Finally, American educational scholarship may need to more generally recognize the legitimacy of "teacher knowledge"--and exploit that knowledge more genuinely in teacher education research. As Michael Atkins (1989) and others have suggested, recent trends to include teachers in research agendas, to implement action-research in schools, and to solicit teachers' opinions for research informing policy issues do not go far enough in tapping the wisdom that is truly available in the experience of veteran teachers. As Atkins points out, such strategies involve teachers on the level of data collection only--after the university researcher has delineated not only the problem to be studied, but the appropriate methodological approach as well. Almost never are research questions initiated by classroom teachers themselves, and even more rarely do such studies find their way into textbooks for aspiring teachers.

What Sarason (1982) has called the "dailiness" of the classroom--those subtle routines and context-specific rituals that only teachers know about--are what noviates claim they were never exposed to in the course of their pre-service training. And yet it is this subtle ecology of the classroom that is the overwhelming reality of teaching. Without it, young teachers will continue to experience their assimilation into the profession--as these subjects did-- as an ordeal characterized by floundering and disorientation.

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